

Beaufort Gazette
Beaufort, SC
Circ. 13086
From Page:
1
3/27/2007
65006



135

County plans new facility for seniors

The Beaufort County Council awards a firm a \$76,000 contract to design a 2,000-plus-square-foot senior center at Burton Wells Park.

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Beaufort County's explosively growing senior population is likely to have a new recreational facility all its own at Burton Wells Park.

The Beaufort County Council unanimously awarded a \$75,739 contract to Stewart-Cooper-Newell Architects on Monday for the design of the county's first publicly owned senior center.

Neither Beaufort County nor any of the county municipalities directly operate recreational facilities exclusively for seniors, though the Town of Hilton Head Island pays for about 36 percent of the SHARE Senior Center's \$1.7 million budget, part of the non-profit Island Recreation Association, said association Director Frank Soule.

Please see SENIORS on 5A



Beaufort Gazette
Beaufort, SC
Circ. 13086
From Page:
5
3/27/2007
65006



SENIORS

Continued from 1A

Senior activities offered through Beaufort County Parks and Leisure Services or the nonprofit Senior Services of Beaufort County, formerly the Beaufort County Council on Aging, often compete with other organizations vying for multipurpose space, said parks Director John Miller and senior services Executive Director Janette Williams.

For example, the Burton Wells Recreation Center's multipurpose spaces are used for community meetings, county staff training and an after-school program. A karate class also uses the center's racquetball courts, Miller said.

The older population is one of the county's fastest-growing demographics. The county's 65-and-older population grew an estimated 122 percent from 1990 to 2005, according to U.S. Census data. In 2005, 23,668 people, or 18 percent, of all county residents were 65 or older, according to census estimates.

Local seniors had mixed reac-

tions to the plans.

"There's a lot of retirees moving in. Something like that would work," said Joan DeLong, 66, of Lady's Island. She said she would like a space where retirees could dance or play card games or dominoes.

Knute Knudson, 84, of Beaufort, was on his way into the Wardle Family YMCA in Port Royal on Monday and said he would prefer it to the future site of the senior center at Burton Wells Park, about 5.5 miles from downtown Beaufort, for his recreational needs.

"It's too far away, and I've got the Y," he said. The YMCA facility is about 4 miles away from downtown Beaufort.

Unlike the YMCA facility, Williams said her organization could offer programs in arts, crafts, health and wellness at the new space.

"As we stand right now, Beaufort County does not have a designated senior center. This would be an ideal location for the new building," she said.

The new senior center is planned to be 2,000 or 2,500 square feet, comparable to the senior center on Hilton Head,

with a covered walkway connecting it to the recreation center, which by comparison is 24,000 square feet.

The new space could accommodate up to 250 people at any time, making large banquets or social affairs possible, Williams said, though current spaces can

only accommodate 50 people at the most.

"This will probably be the largest space we have to occupy," she said.

The senior center is expected to have a large multipurpose room, a computer café, kitchen, large porches and outdoor seating areas, according to a design recommendation memo from County Engineer Bob Klink to County Council members.

Klink's memo also lists a \$537,000 proposed budget for the project: \$365,000 in state grant money, \$72,000 from a county capital improvement plan account specifically for the senior center and another \$100,000 from the county's 2003 general contingency capital improvements plan account, though the County Council only has formally allocated \$75,739 for the design portion of the project.